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Daniel Reynaud

Avondale College of Higher Education, daniel.reynaud@avondale.edu.au

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A CHRISTIAN AESTHETIC FOR THE ARTS

Creativity and Theology

Daniel Reynaud

The Christian legacy in the arts is unrivalled. The soaring architecture of the medieval cathedrals, most of whose designers and builders are anonymous, are testaments to the highest levels of artistic taste devoted to the glory of God. It is Western society, mostly in the context of the church, that developed polyphony and created the richest musical tradition in the world. Christianity patronised painters, who developed perspective and realist representation, both of which were significant advances in visual representation. Sculpture, drama, poetry and prose literature, though in some cases inherited and revived from Greek and Roman traditions, have been cultivated by Christianity. In a largely illiterate medieval society, church mystery and morality plays, festivals, paintings and stained glass windows communicated the stories of the Bible.

However, in the modern era, artistic innovation has been taken over by secular culture, and many Christians ignore or even fear the arts. We are often suspicious of them and critical of their pernicious influence. Adventists inherited from their spiritual forebears—particularly the Methodists—a prejudice against novels and other forms of fiction, stage drama, movies (especially when shown in theatres), television (which we roundly condemn while we regularly watch), pop and rock music (also roundly condemned but widely listened to), modern art (which often strikes us as bizarre and incomprehensible), and even of architecture (reflected in the lack of taste in the design of so many of our churches). While there is plenty to complain about in the arts, a poverty not only of aesthetic value but also of moral worth, to discard all arts on the basis that much of it is valueless and corrupt is a mistake: let us aim to retain the baby even as we drain out the bathwater.

The sad history of this began with the Protestant Reformation in the 1500s and continued through the increasingly strict Puritan tradition, which has left its mark on many modern Protestant denominations, especially those with their roots in the non-Conformist faiths, such as Seventh-day Adventism. It began with some

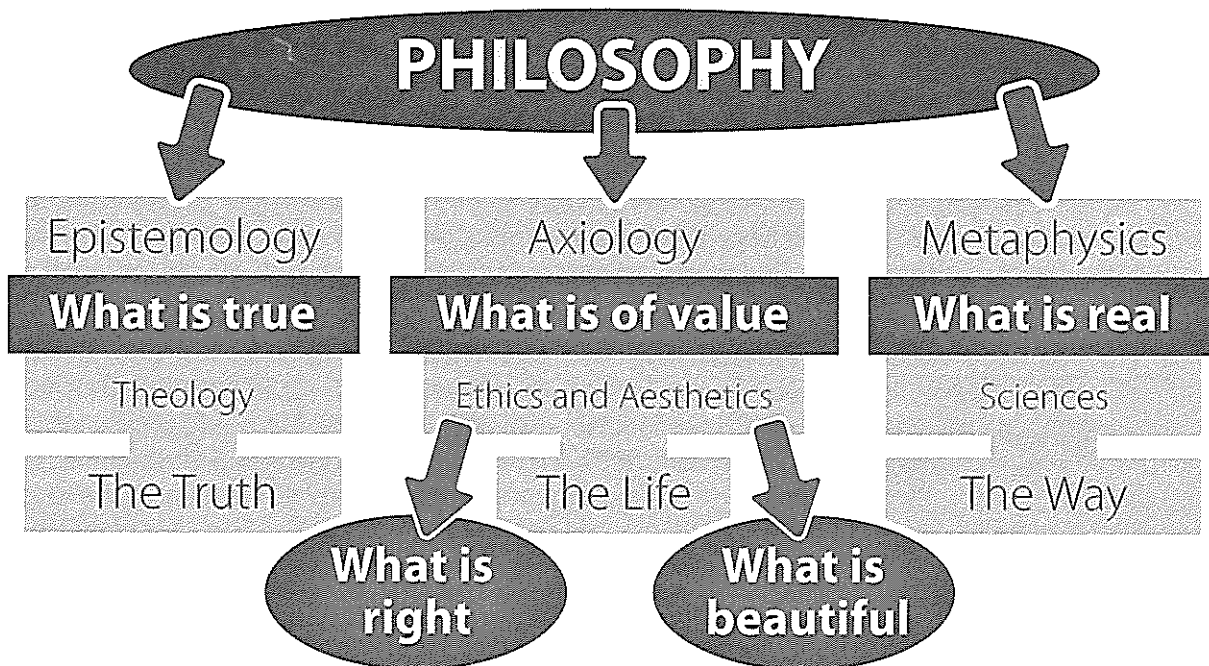
Reformers who rejected everything that smacked of Catholicism, even throwing out church organs and singing in harmony as being evil practices. As champions of the Word, Protestants struggled to understand the role of non-verbal arts and destroyed images in churches as distracting idols, holding up the simple word of God. It didn't help that England's King Charles I combined outstanding artistic taste with a Catholic-leaning religious inclination. His Puritan opponents came to associate the arts with his Catholic outlook—and condemned both. The English Civil War hardened opinion and ensured that English non-conformist Protestants would carry a deep suspicion of the arts as being spiritually dangerous. They argued that only the plain and unadorned represented pure and untarnished religion, and enforced it in all matters from the decoration of churches to personal dress codes. There are elements of truth in this, but at an extreme it becomes its own form of idolatry, and it robs faith of the God-given gift of the creative arts. Christianity needs to reclaim this gift that speaks richly of God's character.

Part of the difficulty that Adventism has had in dealing with the arts has been a lack of understanding where art fits into the overall scheme of things. Perhaps the only art form welcomed by early Adventists was music, again as a legacy of their Methodist forebears, where the hymn-writing Wesley brothers raised music in the artistic repertoire of Evangelical Christianity. But early Adventism's passion for theology was all-consuming, leaving little room for anything else. The Seventh-day Adventist Church began as a movement compelled by the imperative of an imminent Second Coming. In the light of that and the exciting discovery of new truth such as the Sabbath and the investigative judgment, it seemed a waste of time and energy—a mere distraction at best and an evil at worst—to encourage what was seen as "frivolous" creativity. Why paint beautiful pictures if they were all soon to be destroyed in an apocalyptic conflagration? Instead, Adventist energies were devoted to discovering truth and saving souls.

Consequently, "The Truth" is something close to the Adventist heart. The branch of philosophical activity that studies truth is called epistemology. The major discipline devoted to epistemology is theology. As Christians, we note that the ultimate Truth is not a set of doctrines, but a Person. Yet Jesus proclaimed Himself to be more than just Truth. He said He was also the Way and the Life (see John 14:6). Metaphysics—the study of reality (the domain of the sciences)—might well be equated to the Way, and axiology—the study of value—might be equated to the Life.

Axiology has two parts: ethics, the study of right and wrong, and aesthetics, the study of what is beautiful. Adventists have a well-developed biblical theology, and take a strongly biblical approach to the sciences and to ethics. However, when it comes to aesthetics, we tend to respond to the arts not from a biblical aesthetic but rather from a biblical epistemology.

However, while theology, the sciences and even ethics deal largely with binary opposites—right and wrong, black and white—aesthetics does not follow the same process. We need to approach each discipline according to its own principles. For example, neither the existence of God nor His character can be proved—or disproved—by science. Not because believing in God is unscientific, but because He is bigger than the scientific method. The scientific method is based on testing evidence by subjecting it to standardised tests. For something to be strictly scientific, it must be a repeatable event, producing the same results when tested under the



same conditions. However, “science” is often used quite loosely, often meaning that there is evidence rather than proof. There is scientific *evidence* for evolution—and for creation, for that matter—and even for God, but none of these can be *proven* by the scientific method. When working on a larger canvas in the sciences, scholars look for weight of evidence, rather than absolute proof. But the strictly rational methods of science are imperfect tools for exploring truth. Christian author and apologist G K Chesterton noted that, “You can only find truth with logic if you have already found truth without it.”¹

To find the truth about God, we must use the methods of theology. To find reality, we use the scientific method. If we want to know about gravity, we ask a scientific rather than a theological question. Medieval theologians made the mistake of applying misinterpreted scripture to the scientific realm, insisting that the world was flat with corners (repeating a mistake of their scientific colleagues, it might be added). Modern Christians have no trouble with the science of a round Earth, because we recognise that the shape of the Earth is a scientific rather than a theological issue. We must avoid making the same mistake by applying the rules of theology to the study of beauty. We cannot judge beauty by the rules for determining truth. We must use aesthetic principles to judge aesthetic concerns.

C S Kilby writes, “Our excuse for our aesthetic failure has often been that we must be about the Lord’s business, the assumption being that the Lord’s business is never aesthetic.”² By contrast, as has been noted by a number of commentators,³ the first biblical mention of the gift of the Holy Spirit is in endowing Bezalel with artistic skill (see Exodus 31:2, 3). Creation is also linked to the Holy Spirit (see Genesis 1:2). It seems creativity is an inherently spiritual activity.

The first biblical principle of aesthetics is that **to be creative is to reflect the image of God**. When God said “Let us make human beings in our own image” (Genesis 1:26), He was Himself undertaking His most creative task that we know of. To be in His image must therefore mean that we too are creative. John Oswalt writes, “We are most fully human, most fully experiencing our uniqueness, when we are being most creative.”⁴ To be creative is to make a statement about the character of God, one that is different from those that theology or science make about Him.

The second biblical principle is the **wholeness of humanity—mind, body and soul**. One of Adventism’s great strengths is the health message—that God wishes to restore our whole being, not just the “spiritual” parts. Creativity is also a God-given quality that needs restoring.

The Bible also promotes a **variety of art forms**. While the First Commandment forbids images, the tabernacle and temple were full of them, from cherubim and carvings to oxen holding up the laver. In 2 Chronicles 3:6, we read, “And [Solomon] garnished the house with precious stones for beauty” (KJV). Jesus used parables, including the fictional story of Lazarus and Abraham (see Luke 16:19–31). Poetry, dance and music are all recorded in the Bible, used both positively and negatively, showing that art forms and instruments are not inherently moral, but it is how they are used that matters.

Biblical art suggests that **art should have an artistic end**, not just an epistemological one. Some psalms for example describe God as uncaring, sentiments that are theologically inaccurate. Psalm 137 blesses those who in vengeance dash Babylonian babies against the rocks. Psalm 88 is a lament that offers no hope of rescue or salvation. The function of these psalms isn’t to hold up a pure theology but to accurately represent our limited human perspectives. God so approves of this kind of honesty that He inspired their composition and then preserved them in His divine songbook.

Similarly, the sensual language of Song of Songs is an artistic celebration of Love. It does not describe love theologically, as perhaps 1 Corinthians 13 or 1 John might, or scientifically (say in terms of hormonal activities), but its artistic description reveals love experientially and emotionally, which are such vital dimensions of Love. By allowing its aesthetic to speak, we are led back to truth as we enter the beauty of Love, and therefore of God.

Of course, there may be cross-over: 1 Corinthians 13 is a masterpiece of language and a profound theological statement, and much of the Bible is literary art. The best art often carries powerful statements on truth and reality—but it doesn’t have to. Solomon placed precious stones on the temple walls, not for their religious symbolism but for their beauty. That made its own statement about a beautiful God.

Approaching art from a theological perspective leads to confusion. Should Christian artists only make religious art? What of other professions: should Christian builders only build churches or Christian mechanics only repair the pastor’s car?

Our confusion stems from seeing Christian art as purely evangelistic—that is, epistemologically, for spreading truth. But it is the task of preachers to preach truth; artists testify to the wonder and beauty of God. However, art often leads us to truth and reality. In doing so, they may in fact “preach” as powerfully as any evangelist, but

through a different avenue. As Ellen White notes about music, artistic expression “is one of the most effective means of impressing the heart with spiritual truth.”⁵

Because art involves taste, it creates a problem for binary theological or scientific thinking. We should learn to *appreciate* art as much as possible, that is to understand and value the quality of form and content, but we need only *like* what we like. Liking or not liking is not a matter of good and bad: it is entirely acceptable not to like a piece of good art, but we should learn as best we can to appreciate. For example, I don’t particularly like Charles Dickens’ books, but I can appreciate the qualities that made him a good writer.

Perhaps one of the key reasons for a Christian suspicion of the arts is that they have all-too-often been used for evil. For example, popular entertainment often contains values that contradict Christian truth, as does some classical literature, art and music. How do we respond to this? How do we respond to the depiction of evil in art? Firstly, we recognise that not every representation of evil is morally deficient. The point is whether the art speaks truthfully about evil. For example, popular film often presents situations where law-breaking violence by the hero is justifiable and casual sexual relationships have no repercussions. Neither of these represents the truth.

But take a biblical example of the representation of evil: the concluding three chapters of Judges. They document in cold-blooded tones crimes such as rape, murder, betrayal, genocide and mass abduction. But they do so in the context of the moral judgment: “In those days Israel had no king; all the people did whatever seemed right in their own eyes” (Judges 21:25). In other words, Judges documents carefully that evil behaviour has evil consequences. Thus, while the emphasis is on evil, its true results are clearly demonstrated. This is the context in which the portrayal of evil should be judged in art: does it tell the truth about good and evil?

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Art that does not tell the truth can be interesting at an aesthetic level. However, by turning to other aspects of philosophy, we can engage it at an ethical and theological level and draw conclusions about its worth, deciding that while it is aesthetically valuable, it is morally defective, and therefore not appropriate for the Christian.

The best way to illustrate the difference between an aesthetic approach and that of theology or science is by example. So let’s take Joanna Darby’s painting “After the Flood”—reproduced on the cover of this book. When I first saw it, I did not know its title, so I had no clues as to its subject. It was merely a piece of abstract art to me.

So, if I was to approach it theologically, I would ask, “What truth does it tell me?” And the answer would be: “Not much.” I can see a white bird in the top left, which could be a dove, and there appears to be the outline of a

twig in the centre. I might connect these to biblical symbols of the Holy Spirit, and perhaps an olive branch, symbolising peace—but the rest of the painting is pretty confusing.

So let's take a reality approach. It is rather much the same: one somewhat-stylised bird and one outline of a twig. There is not really much else that looks real. My conclusion could be now that this is a "useless" painting.

But let me approach it aesthetically. First, I look at its composition: lines, colours, textures, shapes. I see three main features: the brilliant "sky," the pinkish hill, and the busy rectangle below the horizontal line. That rectangle is full of shapes—mostly round or oval—and colours. A tip I have learned to help access art that appears difficult at first is to ask: "How does it make me feel or how do sections of it make me feel?" Then ask: "What elements in the work make me feel that way?" The rectangle is very busy, noisy even. Emotionally, it feels a bit like my week, chock-full of "things" crammed together and apparently trapped under a ruled line. The line is the only rigidly straight thing in the painting. It feels forced, man-made, while all the other shapes have more natural lines. It feels like a human world, busy, rigid, perhaps even repetitive.

Above the line is what appears to be a hill. It has a number of the shapes from below the line repeated, but much less densely. However, it also has a strong suggestion of "bleeding" with red, pink and brown paint allowed to run down the canvas. The feeling is of a costly effort, as if these shapes have escaped the ruled line and climbed the mountain, but have had to bleed to do so.

Then there is the sky. To the right, it has pinkish hues, but that is eclipsed by the left and centre, with their luminous gold tones. In these, I can distinguish the bird and the twig. It looks like a brilliant dawn, the bird a well-recognised symbol of peace, as is an olive branch. (By the way, did you notice that the tone of my language changed when I shifted from the truth and reality approaches—which are more cognitive and less personal—to the aesthetic which uses highly subjective, emotional language?)

Put it all together and my initial decoding comes up with this: out of the busyness and trapped life that I live, there is the possibility of escape. But escape to the top of the mountain requires sacrifice, but then a golden dawn breaks, promising peace.


Now, interesting things happen from here. Taking the aesthetic approach from the start actually opens up the worlds of truth and reality. I have found truth and reality in the painting, which I couldn't find when I used truth and reality as my primary approach. But someone might argue that Joanna might have meant something quite different in the painting—and, seeing her title, that is probably true.

Nevertheless, I would argue that part of the beauty of creativity is that it isn't a one-answer-is-right-therefore-all-others-are-wrong system. My interpretation of the painting is valid, because it rests on the actual features of the painting. Someone might offer a *better* interpretation, drawing conclusions that make richer and more unified use of the painting's features, but that wouldn't entirely negate my understanding. And, after all of this, I don't relate strongly to this painting. Visually it doesn't appeal to me. But I do appreciate it, because I can see a value in it. On the other hand, other Darby paintings really appeal, so much so that I have purchased two of them that now hang on my wall at home.

Jesus is the Way (reality), the Truth (doctrine) and the Life (beauty). As we respect each of these avenues to

understanding God, our love and knowledge of Him will grow. Theology testifies to His truth, science to the realities He made, and aesthetics to His awe, beauty and wonder.

—Daniel Reynaud grew up in a home where both faith and art were deeply valued. Painting, sculpture, music, literature, photography and film were discussed and appreciated, all within an Adventist Christian context. For all of his professional life, first as a secondary school teacher in New Zealand, then as a lecturer at Avondale College of Higher Education, he has been involved in creative practice, particularly in music, drama and writing for film and television.

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1. G K Chesterton, "The Maxims of Maxim," *Daily News*, February 25, 1905.
 2. C S Kilby, in L Ryken (editor), *The Christian Imagination*, page 44.
 3. Among them, Joanna Darby, Gabe Reynaud Awards speech, Manifest Creative Arts Festival, March 31, 2012, Avondale College of Higher Education.
 4. John Oswalt, *The Leisure Crisis*, Scripture Press Publications. 1987, page 89.
 5. Ellen White, *Education*, page 167.